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ABSTRACT

The rural population turnaround, rapid and largely unanticipated, has created a gap between the changed social and economic conditions in rural America and public policies and programs, which were formulated in response to 30 years of rural population decline. For several reasons, public policy has not yet responded to the population turnaround with new legislation and new programs. First, the rural turnaround is a relatively new phenomenon and raises issues that are not yet clearly understood. Second, the turnaround is not uniform or universal. Third, rural growth is seen as an indicator of a revitalized rural America, a positive view that complicates the political problems of developing rural policy. The rural population turnaround should be considered in the context of a comprehensive rural development policy concerned with the overall well-being of rural people including the provision of essential services in isolated and sparsely populated areas; the capacity of local institutions to anticipate, plan for, and adjust to change; and the coordination of federal, state, and local programs. Researchers can contribute to this goal by addressing questions relevant to rural policy and by learning to effectively communicate their findings to the policymakers. (JH)

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INTRODUCTION

Seldom before has a social phenomenon generated so much popular interest as the population turnaround in rural America, but resulted in so little new policy and program development. Beginning in 1973, with extensive stories in the Washington Post (Chapman, 9/26) and New York Times (King, 11/11), and continuing to this day, scores of feature articles in major newspapers and magazines have focused on the turnaround. Paradoxically, this significant social change, rapid and largely unanticipated in most parts of the country, has generated very little legislative discussion or action. This contrasts sharply with the 1960's and early 70's when continuing rural depopulation and economic decline brought forth significant new Agencies and programs such as the Area Redevelopment Administration and its successor the Economic Development Administration, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and the Rural Development Service (which resulted from passage of the Rural Development Act of 1972). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the reasons for the gap between changed social and economic conditions in rural America and public policy.

WHY SHOULD PUBLIC POLICY FOCUS ON THE RURAL TURNAROUND?

Despite renewed population growth and economic vitality, rural America continues to have a number of "population problems." They include: (a) a disproportionate share of the Nation's poor, (b) inadequate access to essential services and economic opportunities especially in low density areas, and (c) an uncertain capacity to adjust to rapid growth.

Because population decline was the rule for most of rural America for 30 years, public policies and programs were formulated primarily to meet this problem. Similarly, we are used to thinking mainly about the problems attendant to rural population decline. But rapid growth, particularly if it is unanticipated or a break with past trends, can create adjustment problems as well. Since the outcomes of growth and decline are different, different adjustments are likely to be required of local institutions--implying that different public policies and programs may be appropriate.

Three aspects of population change--size, composition and geographic distribution--must be considered to understand its impact. All three have direct implications for community structure and function. Moreover, alterations in the rate of change can also cause social and economic dislocations and necessitate institutional adaptations and modifications. Population change bears a potential impact on the delivery of public and private services, on fiscal capacity and tax base, on the adequacy of social and political institutions, on the structure of the economy and the labor force, on agriculture, land use and water resources, on the viability of business and commercial activity, the availability of

of community facilities and infrastructure, on social relations, housing and access to various types of credit.

Changes in population size and composition have a direct bearing on the demand and need for services, facilities and economic opportunities. As demonstrated in figure 1, varying demographic trends place distinctly different pressures on the community. Migration is selective by age. Over 50 percent of post-1970 nonmetro net migration was composed of persons between ages 35 and 64; a third was among persons under 35, and 17 percent was among the elderly (Bowles, 1978; Zuiches and Brown, 1978). Although the elderly made up only 17 percent of nonmetro net migration, they are often prominant in rapid growth areas such as Florida, the Southwest, the Ozarks, and the Upper Midwest. Migration of the young and elderly exerts very direct demands on the community for social economic and institutional support.

Hence, communities experiencing net inmigration can expect to receive a larger number of school age persons, younger working age persons, and in some instances retired persons. Conversely, communities experiencing net outmigration can expect to lose younger households and with them numerous school and working age persons. They can expect their populations to become relatively older and to be composed of relatively smaller households. In most instances, outmigration does not reduce the number of households, but merely diminishes their size. Thus, household-oriented service needs may remain constant in such communities.

Figure 1 Here

As a consequence, communities experiencing inmigration will be pressed to increase their support of educational resources, to provide more and larger housing units and water, sewers, utilities and other services associated with housing, and they will need to expand their economic base to provide more jobs and allied manpower services for inmigrating workers (and for their children who will join them in the labor force in the years to come).

On the other hand, communities that are losing population will have a reduced need for educational services, new housing units and new jobs. 1/ However, as their populations age, communities may be pressed to supply other types of services that may not have been previously needed. The demand for health care is likely to grow as is the need for public transportation, since older persons are less apt to drive their own automobile. The nature of existing housing may become inappropriate with smaller units, apartments and institutional housing taking on new importance. And, job training and retraining may be necessary to prepare older workers, or persons previously outside of the labor force, for jobs in local businesses which are experiencing a labor deficit because some of their workers have moved away.

Adjustments to population change are not automatic. The decisions to provide more school rooms and teachers, more miles of sewer pipe or industrial parks do not flow automatically from the mere presence of more school age children, households or working age persons in the com-

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1/ Communities often lose population because of insufficient employment opportunities. After a period of decline, ironically, they often find themselves with excess capacity vis a vis their current labor force.

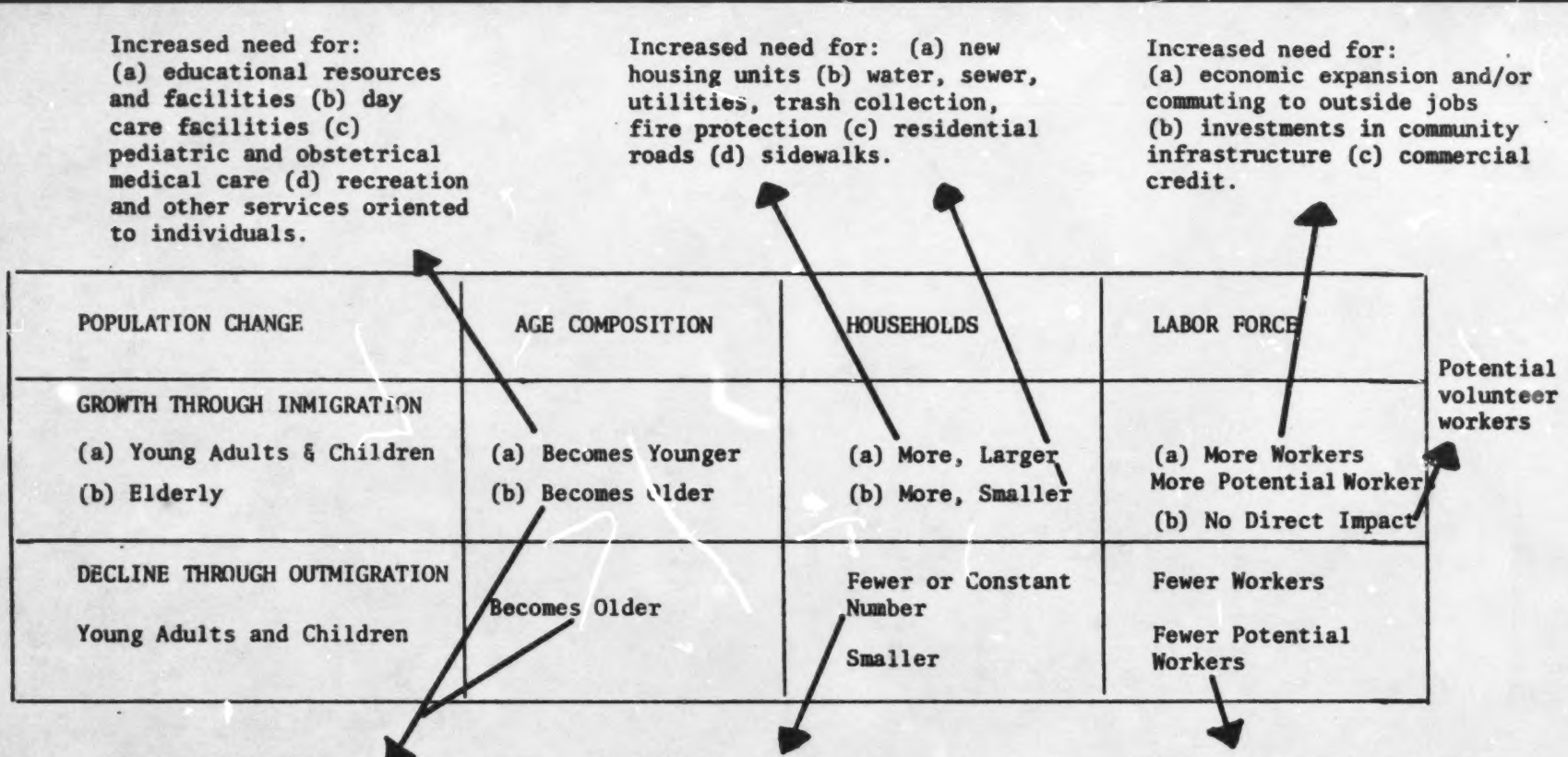
Increased need for: (a) educational resources and facilities (b) day care facilities (c) pediatric and obstetrical medical care (d) recreation and other services oriented to individuals.
Increased need for: (a) new housing units (b) water, sewer, utilities, trash collection, fire protection (c) residential roads (d) sidewalks.
Increased need for: (a) economic expansion and/or commuting to outside jobs (b) investments in community infrastructure (c) commercial credit.
POPULATION CHANGE
AGE COMPOSITION
HOUSEHOLDS
LABOR FORCE
Potential volunteer workers
GROWTH THROUGH INMIGRATION
(a) Young Adults & Children
(b) Elderly
(a) Becomes Younger
(b) Becomes Older
(a) More, Larger
(b) More, Smaller
(a) More Workers
More Potential Workers
(b) No Direct Impact
DECLINE THROUGH OUTMIGRATION
Young Adults and Children
Becomes Older
Fewer or Constant Number
Smaller
Fewer Workers
Fewer Potential Workers
Increased need for: (a) geriatric medical services (b) public transportation (c) nursing homes (d) feeding services (e) social programs.
Reduced need for large houses.
Increased need for: smaller housing units and/or apartments.
Need for water, sewer, utilities, trash collection or fire protection may remain constant or may even grow to service new types of units in new locations.
Need to contract economic activity and/or: (a) train local workers or (b) import outside workers.
Excess plant capacity and/or underutilized public infrastructure may occur.

FIGURE 1: SOME ALTERNATIVE OUTCOMES OF INMIGRATION AND OUTMIGRATION.

munity. The impacts of population change are mediated by local institutions and social structure. In fact, the same demographic changes may lead to distinctly different outcomes in various communities because of differences in values and in the organization and nature of decision making. For example, there is great variation in the capacity, and sometimes the will, of local governments to adjust to social, economic and demographic change. The result may be an imbalance between the supply and demand of services, facilities and opportunities in such areas. Hence, institutional capacity to anticipate and adjust to change is an important part of the "population problem" in rural America.

WHY HASN'T PUBLIC POLICY FOCUSED ON THE TURNAROUND?

Public policy responses to a social issue can take several forms ranging from no action, relatively simple changes in the rules and procedures of current programs, to legislative initiatives creating new agencies and programs. One can argue that the level of policy response will (and should) be related to the perceived political and substantive importance of the issue. In addition, there is an essential time dimension. Clearly, one reason public policy has not yet responded to the rural population turnaround with new legislation and programs is its relative newness. This newness affects both the perceived political salience of the turnaround and understanding of the substantive issues it raises.

The relative lack of political salience is attributable to many factors. Most important, perhaps, is that the turnaround is not uniform

or universal for rural areas. There continue to be substantial numbers (about 500) of rural counties which are still declining in population, many of which are seriously underdeveloped and afflicted by poverty. For well over a decade, rural policy has focused attention on these problems, and created rural development institutions and programs mandated to deal with such areas. Until new resources, institutions, and programs are provided, attention to turnaround related problems will come largely at the expense of attention to other rural problems. Such redirection of effort is politically difficult since existing programs have established constituencies who may be adversely affected by any redirection.

Most people have a positive feeling about the rural turnaround. Rural growth, which is seen as an indicator of a revitalized rural America, is consistent with deeply held values of the importance of rural life in the national scheme of things. This general positive view of rural growth complicates the political problem of developing a policy. It is in this context that rural social science research has the most to contribute to policy formulation, and where current research is subject to the most criticism.

To date, most research has monitored population trends and attempted to explain the determinants of population change. Only passing interest has been paid to the potential implications of these trends. Thus, it is difficult for policymakers to judge the costs and benefits of the turnaround, or to anticipate its impact in different areas and for different population groups. Moreover, very little research has focused on the process through which population change impacts community structure--

which institutions are involved, what is the timing of impacts vis a vis the initial population growth, how are the impacts distributed throughout the community, etc.? Yet, these are the issues which can give turnaround political salience as an issue.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the results of such research will be influential in shaping policy. The relationship between research and policy is tenuous. Often, policymakers do not understand how to use the results of research. Equally often, researchers are naive about the policymaking process. Hence, important, policy relevant research goes unutilized. It is our judgment that the burden for improving this situation falls primarily on researchers.

Researchers need to learn how, where, and when one gains entry to the policy process. They need to understand that many groups are involved--the White House, executive branch Agencies, the Congress, the governors and mayors, and private interest groups. As a consequence, there are many options for building bridges between their work and the policymaking process. In addition, research results need to be disseminated to policymakers in a useful and understandable way. Without effective communication there is little chance that the knowledge gained from rural research will impact the policy process.

CONCLUSIONS

Adjusting to the impacts of rapid unanticipated population change is the "population problem" most closely associated with the post-1970 rural turnaround. However, it is a mistake to consider the turnaround as a policy issue in and of itself. The turnaround should be considered in

the context of overall rural development policy. Such a policy is concerned with (a) the well-being of rural people (poverty, education, income, housing, health, etc.), (b) the provision of essential services in areas of spatial isolation and low population density, (c) the capacity of local institutions to anticipate, plan for, and adjust to change, and (d) the activities of the Federal Government in rural areas, and its relation to State governments and local institutions.

The political feasibility of such a comprehensive policy is not high, but certain actions could be taken to increase the understanding of rural issues and their priority on the National policy agenda. Better communication of research results to policymakers, along with more thoughtful selection of rural research topics to ensure that important policy relevant questions are addressed would be a major first step. This would help to assure that rural stereotypes are diminished, accurate description of trends and conditions in rural America is available, and that implications of these trends are known to the policymaking community.

Policymakers are unlikely to propose new programs to ameliorate rural growth problems unless the costs and benefits of the turnaround are quantified. While there will never be unanimous agreement as to whether the population turnaround is "good" or "bad", research can identify some important social and economic consequences of recent trends--Who is impacted by renewed growth and in what ways? What does a community have to provide to accomodate new growth and maintain the quality of life and the physical, social, and institutional environment? How willing is the community to provide the necessary services and facilities? How can they be financed?

Faced with serious gaps in substantive knowledge, and limited political salience to rural issues, the current Administration has still managed considerable policy innovations. Their efforts have been concentrated on a series of administrative reforms which seek to make Federal programs more responsive to the rural situation. These reforms have focused on such critical rural issues as health care, water and sewer facilities, communication, and transportation. These "rural initiatives" do not imply a redistribution of resources from outside of rural oriented programs or substantial new spending. From most reports, they have been well received by rural citizens, politicians, and interest groups.

However, these discrete actions are not a substitute for a well thought-out cohesive rural development policy. An overall statement of goals and objectives is necessary so that the implications of social and economic change can be understood and the impacts of Federal programs evaluated. Moreover, an overall rural development policy will highlight the substantive and political importance of the population turnaround and demonstrate that this "success story" can pose significant problems for areas impacted by renewed growth.

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